Food Poverty and Fair Access to Food

When people think about food poverty they often associate it with people in crisis experiencing acute hunger. The increase in food bank-use across the country is evidence of the fact that many people in the UK struggle to feed themselves and their families adequately.

But insecurity around food can also be a constant and chronic feature of life, with long-lasting impacts on the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities. Those living on low incomes cannot always access or afford to choose good quality, healthy and nutritious food, may lack experience, skills or facilities to cook at home, and may not feel initiatives to improve access to local, sustainably produced food are sufficiently inclusive. As food, and especially sharing food, plays an important social role in bringing people together, food insecurity can also exacerbate problems of social isolation.

At the other end of the scale, 4.3 million tons of food is wasted annually in the supply chain line from producers to consumers. Furthermore, agricultural workers involved in primary production often survive on low and insecure incomes. Food therefore lies at the nexus of poverty, deprivation, employment, physical and mental ill health, social isolation, sustainability and environmental health. It is important that we think about the production, distribution, and consumption of food, not simply as an acute personal problem, but also as a systemic issue with sustainability and equality of access at its heart. In this report we acknowledge the difference that large-scale diversion of surplus food makes, particularly to people in crisis, whilst recognizing that the more deep-rooted challenges we face require a more holistic approach.

Complicating the rosy picture of Devon as a picturesque food-producing county, there are many areas where food poverty occurs and persists. There are also several encouraging examples of innovative, joined-up approaches from voluntary, public and private sectors working together to address these issues. Although there have been some effective partnerships between supermarkets and some of the larger food distribution charities, much of the work in this area is done by the voluntary sector, often in small-scale and locally specific contexts.
The National Picture
As UN Special Rapporteur for extreme poverty and human rights Professor Philip Alston recently pointed out, in his excoriating report on the effects of austerity, the UK has no established national measure for food poverty. However, the figures there are on rates of food insecurity and poor nutrition in the UK are shocking:
- UNICEF reported in 2017 that 10% of children in the UK are affected by severe food insecurity. The UK is the 8th worst-performing of 41 economically developed nations, worse than most, if not all, nations in the European Union.
- The Food Foundation’s research found that healthy foods are on average three times more expensive than unhealthy foods.
- The UK has the third-highest rate of obesity in the EU, yet over 2 million people in the UK are estimated to be malnourished, and 3 million are at risk of becoming so.
- 1 in 6 parents have gone without food themselves to afford to feed their families.
- Oxfam and Church Action on Poverty estimate that over 500,000 people in the UK are now reliant on food parcels.

There has been a steady rise in demand for emergency food aid over the past decade. The Independent Food Aid Network recently reported 751 independent food banks operating around the UK, which together with those run by the Trussell Trust amount to more than 2000. Food bank staff said they were experiencing rising demands and pressures to cope with the logistics of feeding more and more people.

The Trussell Trust’s 2017 statistics show a 13% increase in the use of food banks from the previous year. Between 1st April 2017 and 31st March 2018 they distributed 1,332,952 emergency food supplies. The top reasons for referral to their food banks were low income (26.45%), benefit delays (26.01%) and benefit changes (16.65%), showing that people who are in work, often full time, are also struggling to make enough money to feed themselves and their children.

Whilst certainly useful, these figures do not reflect the full extent of food poverty. They do not include the many informal food distribution networks that may see no need in being identified and that may not operate on referrals from other services. Food bank use alone cannot be an accurate measure of the extent of food insecurity. Often people only visit food banks as a very last result owing to feelings of humiliation or stigma.

Alongside the acute issue of access to adequate quantities of food, is the related one of securing good quality, healthy food. This is often, wrongly, seen as a middle-class preoccupation. As Kathleen Kerridge writing in the Guardian put it, “food is aspirational once more, and healthy, good quality food is for the elite”. Sustainably sourced, ethical, local, and seasonal food is associated with privilege, and a healthy diet can come at a premium, but it is increasingly recognized that these priorities apply just as readily to those at risk of food poverty.
Paying attention to the links between food production and consumption can help tackle toxic cycles of food poverty and develop more mutually beneficial food systems. The RSA’s Food, Farming and Countryside Commission is a major two-year independent inquiry, due to conclude in 2019. Its interim report, *Our Common Ground*, 2018, takes a deliberately broad, holistic approach to considering the challenges facing rural economies, questions of healthy food production and access, and the imperative to safeguard our environment. It challenges the apparent zero-sum choice we are faced with between access to affordable food in an era of rising food poverty, and sustainable food production methods. ‘Disintermediation’, strengthening direct connections between networks of fresh, local food producers and people experiencing food poverty not only addresses the challenge of feeding hungry bellies, but can also boost local economies, which in turn can begin to tackle some of the drivers of food poverty. The agricultural county of Devon is particularly well situated to explore this possibility.

**The Devon Picture**

*Map 1: Emergency food provision, 2014.*
What is the extent of the problem?

The Trussell Trust food banks distributed 120966 emergency food supplies in the South West in 2017-18. In 2014, research reported around 30 food banks (this remains roughly the same in 2019), and 40 other food aid providers in Devon (see Map 1).

In 2013 the Devon Strategic Partnership on Food Resilience carried out some initial mapping on the “potential for food poverty” in areas under Devon County Council using Middle Layer Super Output Area (MSOA) level data, concluding that there may be 20,000 people at risk, 17% of whom are in rural areas, a much higher figure than the 6,600 people living in the four most-deprived LSOAs. The area with the greatest potential risk was Ilfracombe in North Devon. Other urban areas in Exeter, Okehampton, Barnstaple and Newton Abbot also scored highly (see Map 2).

Map 2 Food Poverty in DCC area

Although there is a degree of correlation between levels of deprivation and the incidence of food poverty, it’s not an automatic causal link. This is partly for statistical reasons relating to the scale of analysis, in that there can be pockets of deprivation within relatively wealthy areas (Totnes, for example, has 12.8% of children living in poverty, despite begin within the more prosperous South Hams district council area), and partly because access to cheap, healthy food is highly localised; people tend to access the food that is easiest for them and what is locally available can make a huge
amount of difference to what people eat (Totnes is well-supplied with sources of affordable, locally-grown fresh produce, so people on low incomes living in the town may be less at risk of food poverty than the Index of Multiple Deprivation might suggest). Some areas that are above averagely deprived lie within areas that are judged as having the lowest or second lowest levels of food poverty. This is particularly noticeable in West Devon. It’s a complicated picture, heavily dependent on local conditions, and requiring detailed local knowledge to interpret.

Although this data presents a broad picture of food poverty, the indicators used may not be the most appropriate for unpicking the complexities of factors that could limit or improve someone’s access to enough nutritious food. For example, income levels or education are not included, and access to food and drink outlets is listed uncritically (what kind of outlets, how affordable are they, etc.). It also does not take account of informal networks and the strength of community relations in reducing the potential for food poverty. There is clear potential for further, firmly place-based research into how these factors combine to produce a clearer picture of risk, and therefore how systems could be strengthened to create long-term resilience to food insecurity for individuals and communities.

**Access, Affordability and Awareness**

Fair access to food is influenced by an interrelated series of social, economic and infrastructural factors at the individual, community and national level.

Physical access to nutritious food can be limited by a range of practical and logistical factors:

- Lack of public transport in rural areas.
- Lack of food shops in poorer neighbourhoods.
- Lack of cooking facilities at home.
- High densities of fast-food outlets are often found in the most deprived areas. For example, in Torquay and Paignton these outlets are tied to Torbay’s identity as a seaside holiday destination.
- Although they provide a nutritionally balanced food parcel in the form of non-perishable foods, most food banks can’t distribute fresh vegetables because of storage issues and health and safety regulations.

Access is also subject to financial constraints:

- Low-cost food, especially fast food, often contains little nutritional value, and is high in saturated fats and sugar. Adult obesity rates are highest in Torbay and Torridge (both around 27%), two of the three most deprived local authorities in Devon.
- Children from low-income households are eligible for free school meals during term time, but during the holidays some parents struggle to feed their families. This is commonly referred to as ‘holiday hunger’, and awareness is increasing about it as a persistent and growing problem in Devon as elsewhere. There are
some creative ideas for addressing this problem (see below), but provision is patchy and often uncoordinated.

- Delays and changes to benefits can push people over into financial crisis. Universal credit is being rolled out across further local authorities in Devon during 2018, and experiences from elsewhere have shown that this is likely to cause higher levels of dependency on food aid for many people.

- Low incomes and high living costs in parts of Devon are putting people under increasing financial pressure. The national picture of low income as a top reason for food bank referral is reflected in the county. A holiday hunger project in Torbay reported that the majority of the families involved were working full time but could still not afford enough food as well as other bills and expenses. This situation was also described by services and charities in Exeter and Plymouth.

Access can also be limited by education and awareness:

- Food banks in Torbay that were able to include vegetables in their parcels reported that some recipients were unable to cook with them due to lack of cooking skills (and/or facilities). Raising awareness of how healthy and nutritious food can be consumed on a budget is therefore a key strategy in reducing food poverty.

Community solutions in Devon: What is working well? What challenges do we face?
Local organisations and networks across Devon have a good understanding of the specific circumstances in their neighbourhoods, and are working to address food poverty in a variety of ways. These include:

- Redistributing nutritious food to people in acute need, whether through diverting food waste from suppliers, or through standard food bank models.
- Developing cooking and healthy eating skills, to help change people’s relationship with food.
- Using food’s powerful social function to bring communities together, and challenge social isolation.
- Developing cross-sectoral partnerships that work towards coordinating acute provision and maximizing the reach and effectiveness of activities, as well as providing strong advocacy.

Ilfracombe: partnerships, and waste-avoidance

What’s happening?

- There is strong and positive community spirit and much informal collaboration between people fighting food poverty. A partnership between the community growing project ‘Incredible Edible’, local supermarkets, and a youth club ‘Belle’s Place’ has resulted in a ‘Waste Not Cafe’ serving cooked food once a month, and a weekly surplus food shop. Both the café and the shop only ask for donations in the form of money or time.

- The cafe not only provides nutritious cooked food, but brings people from all backgrounds together to socialise, or simply to spend time in a welcoming and
non-judgmental environment.

Challenges:
The availability of affordable and accessible space in the town. Having a dedicated base to store food in, to cook and distribute from would enable the project to expand, be more accessible, and potentially self-sustaining.

Long-term goals:
Development of a community-supported agriculture scheme that channels surplus vegetables back into the food distribution projects.

Torbay: long-term solutions to holiday hunger
What’s happening?
- South West Family Values (SWFV), a community-interest company supporting families and children, is tackling holiday hunger by aiming to achieve long-term education around eating healthily as well as the immediate need of feeding families in the holidays. They provide skills, recipes and utensils to the families attending their sessions. In 2017 the pilot programme, supported by Devon Community Foundation, ran for one day a week for six weeks, engaging with 28 families. In 2018, ‘Family, Food and Fun’ sessions ran on two days a week for the summer holiday period. Families attend for three hours, during which everyone prepares the food, eats and clears up together. They also take part in craft, forest school or sports activities. This model moves away from a ‘food provision service’ towards an ethic of co-production, empowerment and education.
- Tackling food poverty requires collaborations at all levels and in Torbay the council’s Public Health team works closely with local groups in the community to support new projects and link organisations and people working on similar issues in a more holistic way. Crucially, they acknowledge that the answers lie in the community and aim at genuine co-production to make positive and long-lasting change. Their close relationship with SWFV has facilitated partnerships with local service providers to offer advice to the families on other issues that may be related to holiday hunger.
- Working together with other voluntary and commercial organisations, including Play Torbay (provider of free play activities), Paignton Larder (food bank), Riverford Organic Farm, and other local businesses, is also integral to the success of this project.

Challenges:
- The availability of fresh produce is an issue. SWFV depends on donations from lots of different businesses but often only knows the day before what they will receive. This makes it difficult to plan, and inevitably limits the number of people who can reliably be fed at each session.
- It can be difficult to identify families who might benefit from attending, without stigmatizing and offending parents. SWFV recently decided to give information about the holiday hunger scheme only to families who are already asking for help but this may be missing other people who are also in need.
- The funding and sustainability of the project is a constant challenge.
Long-term goals:
- With the success of the holiday hunger project, SWFV is working on developing a model that can be replicated so that schools can sustain their own programmes. Child poverty rates are high in Torbay and there are many more families that need help, but SWFV doesn’t have the capacity to expand much more itself.
- The organization would like a garden, to involve families in growing food as well as preparing and eating it.

East Devon: healthy eating for all
What’s happening?
- Health and Local Food for Families (HALFF) is a charity, supported by Devon Community Foundation, working with disadvantaged people of all generations to improve people’s health and wellbeing through education about food. They provide free cooking classes and demonstrations in schools and community centres across the area. They have also started a Food Hub shop and cafe in Axminster, which sells locally grown fruit and vegetables and healthy ready meals, and provides an additional income stream for the charity.

Long term goals:
- They aim to establish a local food network to make healthy food more accessible in the area by building relationships with local producers and retailers.

Plymouth: tackling food inequality together
What’s happening?
- **Food Plymouth** CIC is a ‘central connecting platform’ for all things food related in the city. There are many projects and people in Plymouth working on food poverty-related issues and they aim to build on these existing networks and alliances, whilst working in close collaboration with the city’s Public Health team (see our separate report on organizational issues for a full case study).
- The ‘Grow Share Cook’ pilot programme coordinated by Tamar Grow Local CIC (an umbrella organisation run on cooperative principles) and Food is Fun CIC, set out to improve food inequalities in the city. It links local growing and cooking networks with the people who need access to nutritious food the most, aiming to build a local food system that supports people struggling to eat healthily. Food grown at the sites was distributed to food banks and community food projects by volunteers. At the peak of the project in 2015, 100 families received free fortnightly fruit and veg boxes, and 216 pots and pans were donated and redistributed by and to Plymouth residents. An evaluation by Plymouth University found that the project successfully changed people’s ‘food behaviours’ and created a strong community spirit and passion for fighting food inequalities. The pilot project had funding for 18 months and since then it has continued at a smaller scale, and the same supply chain of fruit and vegetables has been used for holiday hunger projects. Tamar Grow Local continue to provide £5 vegetable bags, and anyone purchasing them can donate another one
for someone in need.
- The Plymouth Food Charter was launched in 2010, and has a growing list of pledges from local businesses and organisations to support its aims.

Long-term goals:
- “By promoting healthy and sustainable food as part of a thriving food economy, the Plymouth Food Charter aims to improve health and wellbeing for all and to create a more connected, resilient and sustainable City” (Food Plymouth).
- It has five key goals: A thriving local economy, health and wellbeing for all, resilient close-knit communities, life long learning and skills, and a reduced eco-footprint. An action plan is being developed to achieve these aims.
- One key aim of Food Plymouth is to enable people who are affected by food insecurity to be actively involved in creating policies and strategies. This is a difficult task but is seen as essential for long-term success.

Exeter: tackling root causes through collaboration
What’s happening?
- Across the city there are many initiatives working on reducing hunger, poverty and health/wellbeing issues. At least 17 projects receive surplus food diverted from waste by Exeter Food Action. One of these is St. Sidwell’s Community Cafe. The St. Sid’s model provides affordable, nutritious hot meals but is more than just a café, as it also aims to be a diverse and welcoming community. The social aspect of access to food is a crucial part of the work that they do.
- There is also an effort to coordinate services such as holiday hunger projects to improve sometimes patchy coverage (despite efforts by some MPs, provision is not yet a statutory responsibility).
- The Food Exeter network has grown to include more than 24 organisations working to promote cooperation between local groups and develop goals for the city on food poverty reduction and building sustainable food networks. A recent food poverty summit was convened explicitly to explore the potential for a closer partnership.
- Food Exeter and Food Plymouth are both partnership organisations developing Action Plans as part of the national Food Power movement, which aims to support local communities’ ability to reduce food poverty by strengthening alliances and partnerships.

Long term goals:
- A principal aim of Food Exeter is to tackle the root causes of food poverty, partly moving away from emergency food provision to “transform the way that people experiencing food poverty can access support and create long-term, sustainable lives that are free from hunger”.
- There is also an emphasis on the integration of food growing and nutrition education into schools.
- Food Exeter plans to investigate the potential for a food distribution hub that
would allow local producers to sell their produce at competitive prices, reduce food waste and improve access for those on lower incomes.

- There are plans to replicate the Food Action model in Torbay, though finding suitable storage and distribution space is a problem.

Summary: what is working, and how can we support it?
There are some common themes to much of the work outlined above, and other initiatives across the county:

• There is no substitute for local knowledge and understanding of specific issues of access to food. This is why so much valuable work in this area is done by very small organisations and groups.

• On the other hand, given the ‘systems’ aspect of food production, distribution and consumption, it is very important to develop effective networks and partnerships. This is happening in several places across Devon, with voluntary, public and private sector organisations, along with research institutions, working closely together.

• Increasingly, links are being made between work around acute food poverty and chronic food inequality, initiatives aimed at reducing food waste, those interested in sustainability and ethical sourcing of food, and activities to promote healthy eating and cooking. This is leading to far better understanding of the relationships between parts of the food system, and how we can work to address root causes of problems in the longer term.

• Many organisations understand very well how food, cooking, and eating together can be an effective way of reducing social isolation as well as filling stomachs.

• Food-related work can have important fringe benefits for small community operations – having a café or trading element in the mix can provide opportunities to diversify income, and rely a little less on grant funding.

Resources:
www.sustainablefoodtrust.org (including an article on sustainability and class)
www.foodfoundation.org.uk
www.goodfoodoxford.org (their report, Feeding the Gaps, takes a holistic, and firmly community-based approach to food poverty and redistribution)
www.trusselltrust.org